Public Health *Reports*

Medical Screening

Scientific Contributions

Departments

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Cover: Certified nurse midwives could become the norm for low-risk pregnancies (see article page 386).

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Anthony Robbins, MD, Editor
E-mail: robbins@nlm.nih.gov

Public Health Reports
Room 1855
John F. Kennedy Federal Building
Boston MA 02203
Tel. 617-565-1440; fax 617-565-4260
E-mail: phr@nlm.nih.gov

Robin Chase, Editorial Consultant
Ned Curran, Associate Editor
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EDITORIAL

ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION AND TURNAROUND TIME

Public Health Reports has greatly increased the speed with which manuscripts go through the review process. We sometimes send decisions about publication to authors in as little as a month. More commonly, authors receive a response after review in eight weeks. Of course there are glaring exceptions and we are trying to do better.

Each reviewer is queried for willingness to review by e-mail, fax, or telephone before a manuscript and review package is dispatched by courier service. Our follow-up correspondence with authors and reviewers is increasingly conducted by e-mail.

Because *Public Health Reports* has upgraded its computers with a new set of Macintoshes, we are able to translate almost every manuscript into Word 6.0.1 for Macintosh, in which we work, and back into the original format before returning it. This means we are now able to receive submissions electronically and transmit them to most reviewers in the same way.

We would like to encourage authors to send their covering letters by e-mail, with the manuscript appended as an electronic attachment. This will help speed the manuscript to reviewers and the results back to the authors. With a little luck, our turnaround will shrink further.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

COMBATING MAD COW DISEASE IN THE UNITED STATES

The ominous and enigmatic shadows cast by mad cow disease and other mysterious spongiform encephalopathies, including its human Creutzfeldt-Jacob form, are the subject of Richard Rhodes's newest book, *Deadly Feasts*,[1] reviewed in *Public Health Reports* in the July/August issue.[2] Rhodes explores this problem with the same scrupulous scholarship and insight that characterize his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*,[3] and its sequel, *Dark Sun*,[4] the story of the development of the hydrogen bomb.

It is clear that although the potential magnitude of the problem is difficult to evaluate because of scientific uncertainties and a range of possible scenarios, the threat is sufficiently serious and real to warrant taking vigorous preventive measures both in this and other countries. This may prove difficult given the strength and size of commercial agricultural interests.

In Britain, which has been struggling with an epidemic of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) since the 1980s, an estimated one million cattle have so far been infected and have entered the food chain,[5] but the government has been seen to be less than vigorous in pursuing preventive measures. More recently, the British government has been accused of suppressing information, of obfuscation, and of obstructing scientific inquiry to an extent sufficient to warrant severe criticism by a committee of inquiry of the European Parliament.[6]

Until the last 12 to 18 months, BSE was not seen as an American problem, either presently or potentially. That perception has changed. Although American-bred cattle have experienced no cases, American elk, mule deer, and mink are infected and it is now clear that the disease has considerable capacity to cross species barriers. Moreover, during 1996, 14 human cases occurred in Britain and one in France that appear to have been caused by the agent responsible for BSE. Whether these cases represent rare occurrences or are the first in an epidemic wave remains to be seen.[7]

In June, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued new regulations.[8] In simplified terms, the regulations now require that in processing animals to make feed supplements for ruminants such as cows that the rendering plants and feed mills exclude tissues from mammals that might be infected with transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE). This would prohibit using the carcasses of cows, sheep, elk, deer, and mink. This is a prudent step which, if enforced, should go far toward preventing a national epidemic of BSE such as occurred in Britain.

However, the FDA makes no provision to assure that infected or possibly infected carcasses are excluded from the production of pet food products. This is a curious omission given the fact that numerous cases of spongi-

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In Upcoming Issues

Child Labor Today

Philip Landrigan

This age-old threat to child health is reappearing in certain industries and U.S. communities.

Health Services for Native Americans

Jay Noren, David Kindig, and Audrey Sprenger

As the health service needs of Native Americans change, the authors offer a careful critique and management prescription for the Indian Health Service.

Commentary

Philip R. Lee

The former Assistant Secretary for Health places these critical management issues in the big picture of trying to serve Native Americans.

Rebuilding the Health Infrastructure in Bosnia

J. Michael McGinnis

The Chair of the World Bank/ European Commission Sectoral Task Force on Health reports on his experiences with the shattered health system in the aftermath of war.

Rapid vs Conventional Laboratory Methods for Tuberculosis: Cost and Effectiveness

Sally Jody Heyman, Timothy F. Brewer, Mary Ettling

Decision analysis shows that new methods can save both time and money.

Shade Tobacco Harvest, Whately, Massachusetts, Pioneer Valley

During the early 1980s while working under a Ford Foundation grant to photograph inner-city life in Holyoke, Massachusetts, I noticed some nondescript pick-up trucks and repainted old school buses transporting both Anglo and Puerto Rican adults and teens out of the city. My instinct was to follow the small caravan. We traveled about 20-odd miles north through Northampton, Hadley, Hatfield, and finally to Whately, Massachusetts. Along the route, the common scene was agricultural fields—mostly corn and vegetables—until we reached Hatfield, when the crop drastically changed to broad leaf tobacco (used for the inner or binder portion of cigars) and shade tobacco (used for the wrapper, the most expensive part of a cigar). Shade tobacco is grown under acres of tenting to simulate both the humidity and temperature conditions of a tropical climate.

As I came to find out, shade tobacco is mostly harvested by teenage boys who are recruited from the local towns around the fields. The work is difficult for many reasons. The temperature and humidity are sky high under these vast networks of industrial-scale gauze mesh tenting. No less are the unrelenting insects. Shade tobacco grows to about 10 feet in height. The rows between the stocks are narrow and very long. The boys crawl through the entire field removing just the bottom three leaves, pulling along a large canvas crate that is mounted on skids. The following week they return to harvest the next to bottom three leaves, and so on until all the mature tobacco is harvested.

Throughout the 1980s I returned to this area many times to make additional images and noticed the decline in acreage devoted to cigar tobacco. My thoughts wandered: What would become of this fertile land? Would it be turned into organic farms or developed for housing or light industry? It looked like the valley would no longer produce shade tobacco.

Recently, I had the opportunity to travel this region again. My earlier wandering thoughts were answered. Shade tobacco not only didn't fade away but reigns king! Fields that once grew potatoes or corn are now like greenhouses for the shade tobacco. Cigar sales have been booming as of late. Who are the new cigar smokers? In addition to those cohorts we are already familiar with, a large percent of young people have tried cigar smoking. The youth are now harvesting and smoking it.

Bill Ravanesi

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